UNITY IN JESUS CHRIST
Ephesian 4:1-7,11-16
August 26, 1973

Edmund Steimle, professor at Union Theological Seminary and well known preacher tells about the time he was preaching in a University Chapel. He was talking about the idea of God's absence in the Bible, and the way that idea has gained new currency in the theology of the twentieth century. Suddenly, a student spoke up from the congregation, his voice loud and clear: "This is a lot of nonsense. God is very much alive and present. This man is a false prophet." Steimle answered the student, and in telling the story observes that "from that point on, he had never had such an attentive congregation in his life."

The point is that most preaching is a one-way-street. A monologue. You can't question object - just listen. And, while some preaching is brilliant, literate, inspiring, and other preaching is dull, unintelligent and boring, if it is only a monologue, a matter of one man talking and a lot of people listening, it is not really preaching.

The more I do it, the more I am convinced that at the point of the sermon some of our more important theological assumptions come into play. God, we assume - uses the discipline of preaching to address his people. And that's a rather big assumption. What the Presbyterian tradition adds to it is that the people - the ones listening to a sermon are part of the process. God's word comes alive where people do more than listen; when they wrestle with the preacher: when his words provoke their thinking: when, that is, some kind of dialogue begins to happen. We've tried to program that on occassion. I've met with small groups for the purpose of feed back and discussion. On several summer Sunday's we've had discussions of sermon ideas here in the sanctuary. Beyond that, it is my intent to allow the concerns I hear you expressing inform me as I prepare weekly. The importance of that formal and informal dialogue was emphasized again as I preached to a congregation of strangers for ten weeks. Being a guest preacher is rather fun. IT allows the man to pull out his best without worring about next Sunday. And it allows the dubious freedom of ignorance about the concerns of the particular people he may be addressing on a particular Sunday. But meaningful preaching, I continue to believe, depends on dialogue; good, bad, or mediocre, the act of sermonizing can become the vehicle God uses to address you and me as we bend our shoulders to the wheel - together.

All that by way of introduction to a sermon that will be a little different. You have the text in front of you. I propose that we build a sermon together - by examining the text

RATHER CAREFULLY, BY me suggesting some implications the text has suggested, and then by you drawing your own conclusions - even to the point of writing them down in the space alloted. After the service you may take the paper home and continue working or writing. OR, IF YOU have some ideas that you would like to share with me, leave them on the table in the back. And in the meantime, I'll be preaching my sermon to you.

First, let's look at Ephesians. Before examining a particular text it's always helpful to know a little bit about the document from which it has been extracted. It appears in the New Testament under the title "The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians" - that is a personal document, written by St. Paul while he was in prison in Rome -/to the Christian people in Ephesus - where he had earlier lived for two years.

And right away we have a problem. Thequestion of authorship, to whom it was written and for what purpose have long intrigued New Testament scholars.

For starters, Ephesians includes a very highly developed theological system, unlike any of Paul's other writing. In addition word studies have revealed the use of a startling number of terms that are used no where else in Paul's writings. And while there is nothing conclusive in either of these observations the question of readership presented itself. In the process ⊕ Paul usually wrote to a part. problem in Galation - Corinthians - for instance - he mentioned people by name, referred knowledgably to the problem in question and generally wrote frankly and intimately. Ephesians has none of this - a strange phenomenum/in that Paul knew these people probably better than any other - in that he had lived with them for two years.

So, it has been proposed that the letter was written later, by a Christian whose thought had been informed by Paul's letters; written as a preface or introduction to the collected letters of Paul - for the purpose of circulating them throughout all the churches in Asia.

Now, that information probably never inspiried anyone - but it's the kind of thing that preceeds the study of a particular text. Time doesn't allow us this morning to read the entire letter, so the next approach to the text is to get some handle on its general, overarching theme.

The theme of Ephesians is this: "God is uniting all thing in Jesus Christ".

Paul, the theologian saw brokeness, alienation, separation as the fundamental human problem. Men are broken between flesh and spirit: a war rages in every human heart - in

Paul's words - between what I know I should be - and what, in fact, I am.

The human family is broken - in Paul's world most dramatically in terms of Jesus and Gentiles. And finally, all men are separated from God: the relationship built into the very nature of things has been broken by human arrogance, pride and sin.

Ephesians addresses all three. In Jesus Christ men are brought into a state of wholeness and peace. The old man dies and a new being is born. In Christ men are brought back into a state of unity with each other: all the old barriers and divisions between Jew and Gentile slave and freeman are broken down. And finally, in Christ - the relationship between God and man is healed. God himself has come across the divide.

But Jesus Christ - the one who has done all this healing is no longer here. And so Ephesians holds up the instruement for this continuing process of reconciliation as the church - the Body of Christ.

Two observations about the theme of the letter: -irst: it attempts - as no other document in the New Testamanet to Define God's untimate purpose - what he's about - and the answer it presents - is the bringing together of all things in creation - in a state of wholeness, peace and unity. Second, Ephesians moves dramatically away from the earlier idea that the day of judgement is immanent - with the obvious outcome that a lot of folks aren't going to be in the fold - to a new idea - namely that God's work of reconciliation happens in the context of eternity - with the corresponding possibility that everyone will make it.

At this point we've learned a little bit about Ephesians as literature and theology - and we're ready to look at the text itself. Read text - One of the fundamental rules of sermon writing is never to let your exegesis show: exegesis is the disciplined study of a text. It ought to be there - but the people ought not to be aware of it. Well, this morning since you're going to write your own sermon, the exegesis will be totally exposed.

As we look at the text the word "therefore" alerts us that the writer has just changed gears. The first three chapters have been theology - the explication of God's gracious plan for creation. But now we're going to ~~have it~~ hone in on the particular ethical meanings -implied in all that has gone before.

The text, as you have it, leaves out three verses, which are actually an "aside" - important - but not really related to the logical flow in the agrument. Three major categories emerge immediately: a plea for unity in the Church: the ~~formation~~ foundation of that unity: and the

way unity may be achieved.

A very quick exegesis picks up the following: and you'll have to follow this carefully - or - I fear - become rather bored.

"Prisoner for the Lord" - is better translated "in the Lord", and holds up the idea, so essential for Paul, that there is a mystical unity between Christ and his people.

The calling to which you were called - means that God has assigned all Christians to play a part in the fulfilling of God's vast design for the universe.

The qualities of that life are then listed: loveliness - meekness - that is, the opposite of arrogant self assertion.

Patience - i.e. long suffering; not just of pain, but the determined refusal to give up hope in the midst of trying circumstances. While the world is becoming cynical about the future - in 50 A.D. or 1973 A.D. - Christians are the hopeful people because they know God's ultimate purpose.

Forebearing one another in love - comes across passively -as easy tolerance. It really means assertive, agressive, healing concern for each other. Notice that the emphasis here and throughout is within the Christian community.

Eager to maintain the Unity of the spirit - isn't strong enough: the Greek means "blazing zeal". And the implication is that any imparment of unity within the Church is an impairment of the Church's usefulness.

Also there is no division here between spiritual and functional unity. The early Christians wouldn't have understood that idea at all - or its contemporary step child that allows us to affirm our oneness with the Leutherans, Baptists and Catholics and then compete against them for new members.

The foundation of unity is poetically asserted by way of a seven fold formula. One body one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God. The Jews began with the oneness of God. The law begins "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one..." God's oneness is the foundation of human oneness.

Faith is the inward disposition of the heart. Baptism is the outward sign by which we are joined in one Lord and thus to each other.

And then - another intriguing about face. We are one in Christ, but our unity is not

uniformity. In fact unity is serv ed by our diversity "Grace was given to each of us".

The means for achieving unity are those diverse gifts Christ gives to his church. And the list differs from another catalogue in Corinthians. This one refleds a church that is settling in and learning to take care of itself, instead of waiting for this immanent judgement day. Evangelists, pastors, teachers are permanent functions. And their purpose is to

- equip the saints - the people
- the work of ministry - "deaconing" the Greek reads, serving
- and building up the body, strengthening and nuturing the church.

This section is corporate throughout - although even our pronouns - and our individualistic way of thinking don't ordinarily allow it "Manhood" - "Maturity" is not an individual goal, but a corporate achieveemtn. "We all" doesn't mean that we will achieve our maturity as individuals. But that we do it corporately, together: some may be more mature than others, but what matters is that the Body come of age - the church.

The opposite of maturity is the erratic flippancy of childhood, following first this fad and then that one.

And finally - Christ himself energizes the body. He lives and moves and has being in it.

Now - where are you? If you've stayed with me you're ready to write a sermon. You're ready to apply your perception of the world, your faith, your mind - to the words of the Bible = and draw some conclusions. And it is here - at this point - that words have the potential of becomeing God's Word to us in our situation.

My conclusions from all that has gone before are two in number: and by the way sermons don't have to have three points.

First - I'm provoked by this idea that God is in the ~~basis~~ business of unifying: that he doesn't intend for us to be divided, isolated and alienated: that at the top of his agenda for his creation is that we should - in the vernacular - be getting it together.

I don't think its possible to read that - think about it for very long - and then feel comfortable with a religion that cultivates divisiveness. God is in the business of healing us: he wants us to feel at home - at peace with ourselves - with our bodies, our minds, our gifts. I think this idea gives us a clear criteria for judging what is valid religion and what is invalid. Does it build up? Does it bring together rather than divide? Does it reconcile

and heal? Now, the going can get a little rough here - because the Church, for centuries, rationalized silence salved its conscience on the race issue - by not wanting to provoke conflict. + yet it was contributing to an evil status quo And so we have to w work that through. But the criteria is there: will it contribute to God's plan of unity.

I don't think its possible to accept the idea without then taking a fresh look at what's happening in our community - our nation. I think the idea forces us to confront concepts that may, at first be distastful - like World Community, the United Nations.

In any case - that's the first direction in which I am pushed by the text.

Second, the high view of the Church as the appointed instrument of unity in the world - but also a living, breathing organism intrigues me. We are currently at the end of a period of time in the American Church during which our responsibilities in the world have received a lot of attention. I'm glad I was a minister of the church during that period: it was and is - painful, difficult and trying: for some it has been dangerous. But the Church as an active agent of change in the world - I think - was reborn inthe past decade. Yet sometimes we forget that the Church is not the ubiquitous "they" out there - but us - and thousands of congregations like us. And what we have on our hands here is a living, breathing thing that needs loving, and nuturing, and caring for and building up. The work of ministry is located here - between people. Serving begins here - between people. And we aren't ever going to help unify God's creation - until we experience and celebrate our unity in Christ right here - in this church.

That work of ministry - that concrete love of people for each other - not because they are mutually compatible and like the same color of paint on the walls - but because in Christ they share a common Lord - in our work here. It is what we have for each other. It is what we have for a community and world that is inclined to forget how to love people.

One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of us all.

I hope this has been helpful. Perhaps even fun. May God - use it - and speak to us through it. AMEN

Father we have opened the page. We have brought our abilities of examining to the words. Speak to us. Enliven our minds and spirits: and grant us courage to be your people. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN